

Powerful Personalities: The Drive Behind The Rise And Fall Of The South

Wiley Sword

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Recommended Citation

Sword, Wiley (2001) "Powerful Personalities: The Drive Behind The Rise And Fall Of The South," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss4/4>

Review

POWERFUL PERSONALITIES

The drive behind the rise and fall of the South

Sword, Wiley

Fall 2001

Davis, William C. *An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government.* Harcourt, Inc., \$30.00 ISBN 151005648

This review is also available under the following title:

The Union that Shaped the Confederacy: Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens

One of the American Civil War's most prolific and talented writers, William C. Davis, has focused his latest effort on a misunderstood yet critical aspect of the war: coping with defeat. Most of us know from everyday life that dealing with success is relatively easy, while confronting defeat is far more difficult. It is but an aspect of all human experience. Yet the dire physical reality and mind-wrenching agony of a lost cause for which the very soul is given, and the personal despair that inevitably follows, is a devastating ordeal that reveals much about the human psyche.

An Honorable Defeat traces the fall of the Confederate government from mid-March 1865 until the bitter end and beyond. It is not a technical rendering of events and circumstances, but rather a well-crafted, researched, and thought-out depiction of personalities and leaders caught up in circumstances that they abhorred, even while compelled to act in a responsible manner. This intense flesh and blood account is witnessed largely through two key principals, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and his Secretary of War, the venerable warrior-statesman Major General John C. Breckinridge. As Davis writes, their differing views on "how" the cause would be lost involved a personal struggle amid a bitter battle of ideas and emotions. Dignity, pride, and honor were at stake as well as the posterity of the southern people. Jefferson Davis wanted resistance to the extreme; his iron will, intense inner emotion, and fiery ardor for

the cause precluded accepting total defeat on any terms. The more practical-minded Breckinridge was opposed to these strident views. He saw beyond the impending defeat, and was intent on planning for the South's future-to win a viable peace even if losing the war.

Fully revealed in the course of key decision makers dealing with an ultimate crisis is that dichotomy of perspectives whereby a vast difference is made in the lives of many. The book tells us, often minute by minute of the events that shaped the men and their actions, yet as Davis writes, the critical element was that of attitude. Would the immense resolve of Jefferson Davis and his chiseled-in-iron personality prevail? Or, would Breckinridge's competence, larger purpose and astute practicality be decisive? The answers were not always predictable and, given the magnitude of the issues, were the cornerstone of the South's future. The twists leading to the final results involved some major surprises, and make for fascinating reading. Moreover, Davis's thorough research has presented an entirely believable scenario despite the often-conflicting accounts and opinions expressed by the various participants. Indeed, Davis's forte for analyzing and depicting the personalities and their intriguing political and personal relationships is quite evident. Although his prejudices occasionally seem apparent, as with making Breckinridge an ultimate southern hero and in reviling Joe Wheeler, these are defensible perspectives. Again, while it is Davis's style to tell the tale much as a matter of fact, rather than with intense literary drama, it comes off as an absorbing story. Indeed, this is an important book, not so much in the often painful account of a crucial national leader's fall from power, but more so in the rich lessons of false vanity that history provides. His message is clear and compelling: that stubborn pride and wishful thinking have little basis as a solution to a practically resolved issue.

As if the beginning were any less potent than the end as a matter of historical drama, Davis has further presented an intriguing look at the Confederacy's political inception in **The Union That Shaped the Confederacy**. Described as a biography of friendship, and a story that became a virtual metaphor for the broad range of Confederate experience, William Davis's fine book transcends time, for it chronicles what he terms the tragedy of statesmen too mired in the pride of their opinions to see the broad sweep of imminent change. More dedicated to principle than to survival, these two Georgians of differing backgrounds formed a powerful if unlikely alliance that shaped the formation of the Confederacy. Yet, with great irony, they later became essential exponents of its destruction. In a remarkable story that at times reads like a

novel, Davis tells with careful scholarship the tale of Robert Toombs and Alexander H. Stephens amid their ultimate ordeal: the lost hope and unfulfilled promise of the Southern Confederacy.

All too often we accept the past without regarding the sometimes minor nuances that reflect important turning points in life. At the outset of the secession crisis in 1861, Toombs was on the verge of becoming the Confederacy's president. Yet in a stunning reversal of form, the delegates acted to elect a secondary candidate. Some might have called it a matter of fate. Yet as Davis reveals, the practicalities involved the hard realities of defects in personality and habit.

Unexpectedly, Toombs's close friend Stephens was called upon to fill a responsibility that the powerful Georgia delegation had presumed would involve Toombs. Installed as the new entity's vice president, Stephens assumed a national leadership role, but in title only. The unexpected dominance by and uncompromising wielding of presidential power by Jefferson Davis soon made for frustration and political disenfranchisement for the two Georgians. The path of opposition for Toombs and later Stephens led to resistance and ultimately bitter acrimony amid many personal affronts. Marred by character traits of selfishness and egotism, Toombs turned to military service for redress, but found frustration. Stephens, cast in a meaningless role, and all but ignored by the Confederate president, remained in the background until the increasing misfortunes of the Confederacy placed him in the camp of the administration's active opposition.

Their collective efforts did much to arouse dissension and bring about the public turmoil that threatened the Confederacy's internal tenure. From their significant role as founding fathers of the southern Confederacy, to their idle grasping for meaning and influence as the scene played out, the friendship of Toombs and Stephens held sway-if not in perceived results, at least in the minds of many. In all, their formidable statesmanship and political expertise had made a difference in the course of the South.

Although the events involving the Confederacy's inception and demise were diverse and complex, Davis has provided in these two fine books a revealing glimpse of key personalities that significantly shaped the respective outcomes. Their strengths and weaknesses as decision makers demonstrates that a nation's survival rests all too precariously on the wisdom or ignorance of a select few.

Wiley Sword is a retired businessman and an award-winning author of various books on American history and historical American weapons. His classic study, Shiloh: Bloody April, will be reissued in a new 2001 edition later this summer.